

One Church, One Hope

Lecture AB R Williams

1. Hope and Responsibility

In Eph. 4, we are told that as Christians we have *one* hope as we have one Lord, one faith and one baptism, one God and Father. To have one hope is the sign of our one calling, so it appears in this passage. And the common life of the Body of Christ which is discussed in this chapter of Ephesians is clearly manifest in the unity of our hope. Do we need to say, then, that the unity of Christians becomes most visible when Christians visibly share one hope? And what does sharing one hope mean?

The rest of this section of Ephesians gives us a powerful clue. We are called together so that we may grow together towards the fullness of humanity that is Jesus Christ. To have one hope is to move away from the 'childish' state in which we are blown around by the motivations, thoughts or ideas of the moment or by the manipulation of others. Maturity is possessing some kind of steady identity – having settled conviction and purposes, and having some awareness of what it is that each has to give into the common life of the community of believers. What we hope for is a humanity in which human gifts flow together, in which the strength of each is *resourced* from the strength of others, and the strength of each is *offered* for the strength of others. The one hope is inseparable from the nourishing of diverse strengths. It is about helping each other to become as fully adult in belief and activity as each can be.

In this light, we could say that our one hope was connected with our *responsibility* to and for each other. In the new creation, in the universe redefined by Christ, no-one reaches or enjoys maturity in isolation; to grow up is not to reach independence in the abstract but to arrive at that kind of understanding of yourself and others that enables you to direct your resource – inner and outer – to the other, taking responsibility for their nurture as they do for yours. The person who has grown up in Christ and 'into' Christ, as the text of Ephesians puts it, is someone whose identity is clear and strong; but the clarity involves recognising inescapable dependence on others and responsibility for them. The false doctrine and manipulation from which we hope to be delivered as we grow into maturity must therefore mean teaching that encourages us to see ourselves as isolated units, isolated from Christ and each other, and manipulation that makes us serve the individual goals of another person or party and so denies the reality of mutual grace and receiving from each other.

I have emphasised this dimension of responsibility as inseparable from hope partly because it gives some specific embodiment to what we hope for, partly to honour the great theologian whose centenary of birth we celebrate in 2006. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, responsibility was the key to all ethics and all Christian anthropology. This conviction in Bonhoeffer was rooted in his belief that the essence of Christ's own identity and work was to be found in 'representative action', *Stellvertretung*. Christ stands in our place; all he does is done on our behalf. His perfect obedience is lived out in life and death so that we may live, and for no other purpose, certainly for no individual purpose. But if that is the life he lives, then the life that comes into existence through him must likewise be marked by the same representative quality. He writes in his *Ethics* (pp.258-9): 'All that human beings were supposed to live, do, and suffer was fulfilled in him. In this real vicarious representative action, in which his

human existence consists, he is the responsible human being par excellence. Since he is life, all of life through him is destined to be vicarious representative action.'

So to be in Christ is to be committed to this action for the sake of each other and for the world; the hope of our calling is the hope of this mutuality whose full possibility is given by the one faith and one baptism into our one Lord. It is worth noting that Bonhoeffer does not imagine that this will produce an automatically harmonious ethics within a peaceful society. He speaks (pp.272ff.) of responsible action as action that is willing to risk being 'guilty' – that is, to risk the consequence of a refusal of action that is based on your desire to remain separate from a guilty and compromised human situation. Christ himself becomes guilty in the sense precisely that he will not hold himself apart from the world in which human beings are burdened by guilt, by choices that always have about them the risk and often the reality of hurt or failure. We must be ready to face this, to act in ways that are sometimes not in accord with what would make us feel securely 'good'.

Does this mean acting against your conscience? asks Bonhoeffer; no, because conscience is always that which seeks to restore us to being at one with ourselves, at peace with ourselves, and for the Christian it is always in relation to Christ that we find this oneness with ourselves, not in the confidence that we have satisfactorily kept the law. Our Christian adulthood involves the willingness to expose all we do to Jesus Christ, not to an abstract principle; knowing that this may mean accepting our involvement in situations that are morally complex, that we shall be associated, however we try not to be, with decisions and actions that will not look universally and obviously good. What we hope for is not a clear conscience in the sense of a satisfying account of our moral standing, but the courage to face our imperfection, our faulty judgement and our guilt, in faithfulness to Jesus, accepting his call to repentance and dependence on his mercy. That courage becomes another witness to the call to *Stellvertretung*: we do not act for ourselves, but for and in Jesus and for and with the world's need.

2. Responsibility and the Life of the Churches

On this basis, the life of any particular church becomes recognisably and distinctively *Christian* when it is marked by this taking of responsibility for each other. This is the ground of our quest for a theological perspective that questions both absolute local independence for all churches and excessive centralism. Only Jesus Christ can stand for the whole human race, exercising that representative role which changes what is possible for all human beings. Once that is done, what remains for Christ's Church is the work of mutual nourishment and mutual dependence, as St Paul consistently describes it, the work of what we might call, in the fullest sense, *Catholic* discipleship. And this should make clear to us that the alternative in the church's life to centralised authority is not uncoordinated local initiative but the interwoven life of diverse communities offering their strength to each other's weakness.

Both Anglicans and Old Catholics have worked from this theological starting point. They have seen the historic sacramental ministry they share as the expression of mutual responsibility. If the sharing of sacramental recognition is simply an acknowledgement of different churches meeting a single set of abstract criteria for acceptability, it is not very obviously connected with the Good News and the new creation in Christ. But if it is a recognition that another ecclesial body fully shares the visible commitment to be part of the same fellowship of exchange, of mutual responsibility, it is a declaration of one of the central

convictions of biblical faith. This is why, despite all the difficulties and frustrations that are to be seen in the wider ecumenical scene, the quest for mutual sacramental recognition and 'full visible unity' in ministerial communion remains so significant. For both our bodies, 'communion' cannot be either a narrowly 'spiritual' or internal aspiration; nor can it be a simple institutional homogeneity.

It is especially hard to sustain this vision in our contemporary world and Church. The appeal to plurality is an ingrained part of our culture, and mutual tolerance is seen as the highest of virtues; so the character of our responsibility to each other can be deeply problematic. In reaction to this, it is tempting to seek for clearer marks of institutional unity or control. Although I do not want to spend time discussing the details of our current difficulties in the Anglican Communion, it would not, I think, be wrong to see them as illustrating just this point. The unrestrained autonomy of local churches is seen by quite a few in the Anglican world as an absolute value; others want to see a far more confessionally 'pure' church emerging. But to both parties my question remains, 'How do our structures express responsibility to each other?' I do not believe we can rest content with co-existence only, never mind the open rivalry which in our consumerist world always accompanies plurality. And at the very least, we are being called into a more visible and robust exercise of responsibility for each other through the continuing and deeply significant networks in the Communion that seek precisely to share responsibility in the context of global poverty and need.

Communion is an ethical matter as much as an ecclesial theme; if it fails to be the former, it will have no credibility as the latter. In a recent (2004) collection of documents from the Lutheran World Federation on *Communion, Responsibility, Accountability* (LWF, Geneva), Karen Bloomquist argues that Luther's understanding of ethical action as empowered by the indwelling Christ commits us to a 'communion' ethic, standing before God and before our fellow human beings in responsibility; such an ethic, she writes, requires us to challenge any human form of society that takes itself for granted as 'natural or inevitable' (p.271), in the name of a fully relational understanding of human existence. Referring to the same ideas of Bonhoeffer that I have already summarised, she goes on to show how this sort of ethic enables responsibility also in the sense of a freedom to respond in a truthful way to the situation of others (273).

Living in responsible communion means being in some way separated from any simply local or self-regarding understanding of who you are and what you need. It is therefore one of those means of grace which permits you to see more of the truth of the other and so to respond with greater freedom and a more transforming love – since it is the indwelling Christ whose action is thus set free, not just the goodwill of an individual or human group. To return to our starting point for a moment, this means that in responsible communion we are able to find a unity of hope because we are obliged to question any apparently self-evident hope that we begin with, so as to discover in mutuality the hope that belongs properly to our *calling* – our calling, not our ideas or ideals, the future that Christ alone sees and rules.

Our churches, then, witness not only to a pattern of ecclesiastical organisation that tries to offer a sensible and pragmatic middle way between localism and centralism, but to something we believe to be fundamental in the economy (literally and metaphorically) of the new humanity in Christ. As the great Anglican thinker John Neville Figgis said nearly a century ago, there is no point in having a theory of the church that is about interdependence and mutuality and diffused authority if your politics are authoritarian and oppressive – and equally no point in professing a democratic politics and defending an authoritarian Church. It is most

certainly not the case that a true doctrine of the Church is simply ‘democratic’ in the modern sense; the modern meaning of ‘representative’ speaking or acting which is part of the democratic process is a long way from the representation we have been considering theologically. But this Christian representation does make clear demands on the political world; it means that we are bound to hold ourselves answerable before God for the human maturing of those with whom we share both the Church and the planet. If we as Anglicans and Old Catholics have this in common, and believe that we hold this in consequence of our doctrine of the Church, we shall have a clearer sense of what we, with our diverse traditions, have to offer in the Europe that is coming into being. It is to this that I turn next.

3. The Church’s Responsibility in Europe

It is obvious that our thinking about the nature of the European Union can be enriched by the kind of mutually nourishing pluralism we have been considering in connection with the theological language of our two traditions. The society of states needs just the same balance between supposed autonomy and competing self-interests on the one hand and bureaucratic, rootless centralism on the other as we need in the life of the Church. And if we are to avoid centralising strategies for economic and social justice, we have to foster, as Christians, a vision of society *within* each state that will realise mutual responsibility and a vision of the *community* of states that will produce structures of co-operation and consultation, in economic life especially, capable of addressing the crises that no isolated state can cope with – the needs and rights of migrants, the control of the trade in arms, large and small, ecological pressures, the management of disease prevention as a cross-national concern and so on. If we believe in a common hope for humanity and in the possibility and imperative of mutuality in working towards this hope, we as people of faith are bound to be concerned with transnational structures in some degree, not out of utopian convictions about transnational government, but in order to discover how we specifically and concretely take responsibility for all the things that are beyond any definition of national interest alone.

Our churches are indeed minority bodies in mainland Europe; but they are minorities holding a supremely significant part of the common European Christian tradition that has too often been overlaid by centralism or by nationalism. Neither Anglican nor Old Catholic language has been free at times from local and cultural loyalties that have little to do with theology (this is especially so for the Church of England); but they have also clung to a conciliar, communion-focused account of how the church is both local and global which would have been understandable in the Middle Ages and was so often a casualty on both sides of the Reformation divide. It is why both our traditions have found it relatively congenial to discuss the doctrine of the Church with our Orthodox brothers and sisters. And in the continuing conversation with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters about the charism of a primatial ministry that serves conciliar unity, the conversation requested in *Ut Unum Sint*, this is part of the heritage out of which we speak.

It could be argued that now more than ever in modern Europe’s history, the continent is in need of an intellectually serious foundation for its own liberal identity. Enlightenment universalism has not worn well – largely because it was almost at once swallowed up in uncritical nationalism, in a rhetoric of national liberation that in fact systematically undercut its professed global horizons and generated a new age of war (still continuing). To be able to challenge the ultimate value and unqualified claim to sovereignty of the nation state without capitulating to a bureaucratic, ‘Napoleonic’ universalism is crucial. And here the witness of those churches that claim Catholic integrity but are suspicious of centralisation – the

Orthodox Churches as well as our own – has a potentially powerful role in helping Europe to think through what might be involved in a politics of mutual responsibility for which the old absolutes of sovereignty are not taken for granted. To take responsibility for each other as states, to take on the Bonhoefferian role of representation for each other is to recognise that the political problems most acute in our societies and often least attended to are those that transcend national boundaries.

Needless to say, a politics of responsibility in Europe becomes also a politics of responsibility in the wider world. If Europe takes responsibility clearly and effectively for its liberal and critical political tradition, and if it does so not in the name of some mathematically self-evident

Enlightenment humanism but in the awareness of the Christian and ecclesial roots of this tradition, it will know more clearly what it has to say to other cultural contexts. This is not about exporting unarguable political wisdom to a benighted world of failed and corrupt states, let alone enforcing it by ill-considered military intervention. It means becoming more articulate about the arguments for participatory politics, the right kind of public secularity (able and willing to work with a variety of religious bodies, not relegating them to the private sphere), freedom of conscience, the guarantees of a space not determined by the state. The intellectual tradition of one sort of liberal Catholicism, represented of course by Dollinger in Germany and Acton in Britain, held that only the presence of a constitutionally free Church in the state really made space for other sorts of intellectual and political liberty, simply by insisting on freedoms that were not delegated by government but were inherent in the religious body. If Europe can learn to tell that story about its history, it will know better why its history matters to the rest of humanity. And while it is certainly a bold claim to say that our minority voices are capable of giving substantial input to this relearning of identity, no less capable in some ways than our larger Catholic and Protestant partners, it is not nonsense. Certain things have undoubtedly been forgotten in the mainstream theological history of the modern churches; these have been – for a variety of reasons – given more breathing space in our traditions. We do not have magical answers for Europe's problems, but we have some good questions to ask and a solid ecclesial vision to back up such questions – the vision of that free and risky willingness to stand for and stand with each other before God, so that all may have life.

4. Conclusion

The fragmentation of our world means that, for much of the time, we behave as though human beings were *not* in fact called to one hope. From the Western vantage point, our global politics and economics work as if the good of one part of the human race had nothing to do with that of the whole of humanity – and the suffering of one part equally had nothing to do with the rest of the world. We tolerate astonishing and shocking levels of inequality, within and between societies; we effectively write off tracts of humanity, especially in Africa, as beyond economic redemption; we shy away from the major challenge that affects us all, the environmental crisis, as if we were not bound together in a limited and vulnerable material world. We manage to live with the fiction that only some human beings will have to meet the cost of economic injustice and ecological devastation.

Against all this, the proclamation of a single hope is a word of judgement and challenge. We are being told that in relation to the unique humanity of the historical individual Jesus of Nazareth all may find fulfilment – but also that they find this fulfilment in relation to all those others called into hope. The task that faces the institution of Christ's church in history is to

embody the mutual responsibility that this means; it is the task of opening ourselves to Christ in the other and offering Christ to the other. It is also, concretely, the task of modelling for our states and societies what is the optimal and God-given form of human relatedness – within our own nation, between the nations of Europe, between the wealthy and the ‘developing’ world (to use what is so often a derisory misnomer).

The ecclesial tradition we share as Anglicans and Old Catholics is one in which this institutional embodiment has the form of *consent* to common life and sacramental exchange. Our temptation is always to weaken the sense of unity that belongs in this context, to settle for something less than a true communion - a standing with and for each other in Christ, the taking of representative responsibility after the image of the incarnate Lord. Cardinal Kasper has written (*That They May All Be One*, p.68) that ‘local churches are not subdivisions, simple departments, emanations or provinces of the one Church, but neither is the one Church the sum of local churches, nor just the result of their association, their mutual recognition’. A doctrine of the Church that assumes what I have been trying to sketch is one that fully accepts this double caution. The local churches, the particular episcopal fellowships that make up our respective international structures (like those of the Eastern Churches), are certainly not ‘franchises’ of a prior universal organisation. But equally, to speak of mutuality as I have done is not to say that it is simply mutual relation on the human level that *creates* or constitutes the Church’s unity. Mutual representative responsibility is an acknowledgement of the innate need, even the poverty, of every local and particular Christian community, considered from the human point of view, *and* of the indwelling Christ in each community who is giving his gifts to others. What we recognise in each other is not simply a structure, a legitimate pattern, but Christ; and whatever central structures and ministries exist in the Church must be there to serve this level of recognition.

Everything thus depends upon the sequence spelled out in our text from Ephesians. We are one Body – one diversified, interdependent form of life – animated by one Spirit – one divine agency bestowed upon us to free us to pray. We thus recognise one hope, depending on the single calling we have together received from the one Lord; we respond with one act of trust and self-commitment to the divine Source of all, which we are now enabled to address with the intimacy of a child. And in that childlike intimacy, we learn the maturity we need, Christ’s own fullness and liberty; we become free from manipulation and shallow instability. All serious thinking about the Church’s structures and the Church’s engagement in the world begins here and must return here for testing and discernment. Our own identity as Catholic communities must be defended on this ground, not out of any reactive inherited anti-papalism, nor as a pragmatic middle way. In all humility, we need to be able to say that our structures and culture are our gift to the universal Church, our way of living out our one hope in the midst of human diversity; and we invite our brothers and sisters of other confession and traditions to be open to this, as we seek to be open to what God has given them.

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